"Battering the Boche"—Aiding Wounded

Personal Story of American Ambulance Work Before and After the United States Entered the War

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PART III.

A FEW days afterward Gen. Petain came out to review Gen. Dauvin's division, which was now en repos. We were in the little town of Nesle and they were refilling the ranks of the division.

There is a great deal of misrepresentation about the time men are in the trenches; in fact, anyone who has a friend at the front always speaks of him as being in the trenches, when as a matter of fact he may not be there at all.

A division goes up and attacks. It loses artillery, men, officers, stretcher bearers, cooks, sergeants, gas men, hand grenade throwers, &c. When the attack is completed and it has done its task that division is replaced by another fresh division, which goes in and takes its place in the trenches. The division which has made the attack goes back several miles from the line and there proceeds to refill the gaps. This takes sometimes two or three months. It all depends on what the losses have been.

About Three Months in Trenches.

During this time the soldier has little to do, and if in a year he is in more than three attacks he is doing more than most of the army. The time he usually spends in the trenches is from twenty to thirty days at a crack, so that in twelve months he would not be actually in the trenches over three.

The afternoon was a beautiful, sunlit one. The remnants of the band were playing in the square and Gen. Dauvin was going among his soldiers. There is a wonderful comradeship between the French officer and the soldier and little line of discrimination is drawn. An officer does not hesitate to offer a soldier a cigarette and stand and talk to him, so that the French army is really like one great family. So when the officer calls upon the soldier to do something the order is executed in the greatest spirit of enthusiasm.

There have been other armies in which officers have been extremely overbearing, and I am told there have been instances in which a great many officers have been killed by the enemy—and otherwise; but this state of things has never existed in the French army. The new American army officer may be very prone to feel his authority and if such cases develop the sooner the new officer realizes that the soldier is more important than himself the sooner will he have a force willing to fight with him and under him.

This afternoon Gen. Petain drove up into the square with an aid, followed by two empty cars. The French commanding General is always followed by two other cars, so in case anything happens he can immediately get from one to another. It is a jail sentence for a chauffeur if his car fails owing to his direct negligence.

Another rule along this same line is that if a soldier is hit by a bomb dropped from a German airplane and wounded, after he comes out of the hospital he is then sentenced to fifteen days in jail. This may seem curious, but of course it is a very wise provision, since if a German airplane is circling around overhead and a man is fool enough to stand out in the open looking at it when there are shelters to get into and he is hit by an airplane bomb, he is necessarily incapacitated for no good reason. It used to be common at the beginning of the war for a great crowd of men to stand out watching an airplane fight and for a number of them to be struck and put out of business for the time being.

Decapitated by Shrapnel.

A short while before this I was standing in a dugout while an airplane battle was going on, when a Frenchman went out past me and said he wanted to watch it. I told him that there was a great deal of shrapnel breaking, but he said, "Oh, that's nothing," and stood about twenty yards in front of me, I being perfectly protected and looking up at the fight.

As he was about to speak a piece of shrapnel about as big as a saucer simply cut his head off as he stood facing me, just as though an axe had done it. That cured me from ever watching an airplane battle with shrapnel breaking, unless it was part of my duty.

We are told that Gen. Petain and Gen. Dauvin have arranged for an attack which we are to go into as soon as the division is able. We shall see.

I now had two days in Paris and it was a joy to sit in a chair again before a table with a tablecloth, a plate and a knife and fork. The situation in Paris had become very interesting. The work of the secret service has been simply amazing. They have rounded up a great number of spies and practically cleaned up the city.

I am told that some American officers who had met some of the very attractive girls of the secret service and had loosened their tongues somewhat were dumfounded later to find out that what they said had been reported to Washington. Their mistake was natural, with a new army not understanding the conditions of this modern war, and I understand that it only took two or three instances of this kind to close everybody's mouth.

Unquestionably we must have American troops at the front. They are much needed. France is bearing most of the burden.

The story is that there were terrible bread riots in Milan; that 1,100 women and children were killed and that that was why the Milanese regiment on the front surrendered without firing. The whole Second Italian Army, which, I was told, was made up of anarchists, socialists and pro-German suggestion, surrendered without a shot being fired, and about 65,000 of the Third Army did likewise. That situation, of course, has come out with the accusations against Caillaux, but the hand of Clemenceau is so strong that he is sure to handle the situation for the benefit of the French people rightly and fearlessly.

Gen. Pershing is lauded on all sides by the French and English; his appointment was unquestionably a wise selection.

Graves by the Hundred.

We return to the front, this time to the Chemin des Dames, by motor and arrive at Meaux, the scene of some of the hard fighting of the Battle of the Marne. Here are hundreds and hundreds of graves, all decorated with red, white and blue flags. The cathedral is magnificent; only one gray tower is destroyed.

I begin to realize now what the war actually means to the individual soldier. It is not going out to the front that one minds. It is not the lack of good food. It is not the cold and the rain. It is not never sleeping in a bed. It is not that one is on duty twenty-four hours out of twenty-four, subject to call at any time during the day or night. It is not the being hit with shrapnel. It is not the wound of the flesh. But it is the gnawing of one's heartstrings for the one one has left behind, the wife, the sweetheart, the mother, the sister.

It is the longing for home, whether it is a shack on a side street, a room over an inn or a palace at Versailles. And the gnawing seems greater if home is across that great stretch of 3,000 miles infested with deep sea monsters seeking to destroy you. It is the longing for that place, whether it is in the mountains of Vermont, the plains of California or the sweet, slumberous Southland.

When within about five miles of the third line I began to see all the woods on either side of the road piled with ammunition, and since they would hold no more the fields had great blocks of it covered by canvas. This continued for miles and miles all the way up to the third line.

The two months preparation for this attack at the Chemin des Dames cost in ammunition about one hundred million dollars, to be used in about ten days, when the bombardment was to begin. The feeling is indescribable, but it does make your heart beat a little bit faster as you look at these inanimate, huge masses of ammunition and realize that soon they will be wending their way, smashing through German men, rocks and dugouts, doing their part in the deliverance of the world from this despotic demon.

The Ambulance Corps was taken over by the American army. We were ordered in to Paris. It was with a feeling of real regret that I found myself again going in, not to come out for many a day, especially as I knew the attack might come any day and I did want to be a part of it. However, it is finished; I go in.

Heart Heavy in Paris.

My heart was really heavy and Paris seemed heartless and dull, but I had determined from the moment that we were ordered to Paris to make every effort personally to get out again. The town seemed filled with Americans. There were many who had been to the front (of the Ritz Hotel) and many who, when they got to the front, were going to Berlin. How little they knew or know of "the mole route."

I met a woman who had charge of one of the best hospital units at the front (not of the Ritz). She told me rather an amusing incident of a very pretty young French girl who came out to see her boy and was met by my friend in the doorway.

My friend asked the girl what she wanted. She replied that she had come to see Lieut. So-and-So, who was wounded. My friend replied, "Well, you know we don't admit people here generally. You must have some reason to see him." The girl smiled quite cordially and replied: "I have a very good reason. I am his sister." Whereupon my friend, also smiling, replied: "Really! I am so glad to meet you, because I am his mother."

Girl Much Embarrassed.

The girl became frightfully embarrassed, but my friend simply said, "Oh, that's all right; you can go in and see him."

On my arrival in Paris I at once went to Col. Kean, the head of the new service, and volunteered my services with the new, green American Ambulance Corps. After some time and with the consent of the French I received my paper to go again to the front. I went in rather a curious capacity; that is, I was attached to and fed by the American army and was attached to and paid by the French army.

It was on the morning of October 23 at 6 o'clock that I tucked myself in a first class compartment on the train bound for Mont Notre Dame or Braisne, where I knew the Twenty-first Division was, as I had only left it a few days before. My feelings were very mixed as the jiggly train meandered along.

Paris, with its warm bed and hot water and many conveniences and good food and my dog, seemed better each mile that the laconic engine drew me nearer to the scene of what was to be one of the greatest battles of the war. A feeling of great solitude came over me. Here was I going out to forty green strangers alone and I was not sure that they were at Braisne or that I could possibly find them before nightfall.

The cold and wet and ghastly sights I had passed through loomed up in my vision and Paris seemed good. Yet when I thought of the ambulance men of the Norton-Harjes and American Field Service, that I alone was sent to the front to assist these green men a warm feeling of, perhaps, shall I say pride circled about my heart and I was glad I was bound for the front.

The train was in no hurry, so I arrived at Fere-en-Tardenois four hours late, and at 2 o'clock went up to a cafe and attempted to get lunch. Being a stranger I had to go before a commissioner in order to take out a card so that I could get some lunch. This is true Hooverism.

Another leisurely train came along about 3:30, after I had been standing for an hour in the drizzling rain, but it had made its mind up not to go to Braisne, but to Mont Notre Dame, which was about eight kilometers from where I thought the division was. As it was the only train which was going to the front for twenty-four hours, I piled in and arrived at Braisne just fourteen hours late.

I got out in a perfect sea of mud and a driving rain storm with my duffel bag and a blanket roll. Not a soul was in sight but an old man who had a small pushcart. I offered him five francs to push my things over to Braisne and he characteristically replied that if I gave him the five francs I could push them over myself, which I did.

Crushed by a Camion.

It was now dark and the rain and mud were terrible. You could only see a few feet ahead. At the turn by the hospital a camion ran into a staff car and the car looked like an egg that Gen. Shafter, who weighed about 300 pounds, might have sat upon. At the moment, in the rain and dark, I could not help smiling as I thought of the General's telegram to Mr. Root, then Secretary of War, in which he said after taking the army test: "I rode forty miles to-day," and sat expecting a laudatory cable from Mr. Root. The latter, however, replied simply, "How is the horse?"

On I went, pushing the horrible little cart, the man on the other side being more of a drag than a help. At last we reached the little hospital at Braisne, by a lovely stream, and I went in through the courtyard and asked an old friend there to telephone for a car for an American.

When I came out all my stuff had been thrown on the ground in the rain. So I gave the man five francs and lay down close to the wall, resting my head on my duffel bag and was too tired to care whether it was raining or snowing or the moon was out; but did think the sky was ominous, for it was dark, lowering, foreboding; the rain had just ceased. I was asleep in two mintes. Then I heard "Whizz—e—e," far over my head, and, believe me, I sat up like a shot, went in and said, "That was a Boche shell or was I dreaming?"

"Oh, you're not dreaming," said my friend. "They dropped several notes a few days ago that they were going to shell Braisne to-night." So I had arrived just in time for the shelling party.

Crying From Gas Attack.

I went out into the courtyard and sat down. There wasn't room inside, as the room was filled with a line of soldiers who had been affected by mustard gas in their eyes and they were all crying like babies at a party.

Shells now came over every ten minutes, but they were high up in the air and nothing to concern one. In about an hour a rampant Ford car drew into the yard and Earl Bibb, a very attractive young Southerner, got out and appeared greatly excited. He saw me lying across my duffel bag and wanted to know where I was wounded. I told him nowhere that I knew of, that I simply wanted to join the section.

He was very much amused and said the boys were all thrilled; that a message had come to send a car at once to Braisne with an ambulance for an American, and he supposed I was the first American wounded in the war. I was glad to disappoint him.

We piled my things in and soon we had reached the camp. I had been travelling about eighteen hours and of course had had little to eat or drink. I was informed that the attack was to begin the next morning and I felt happy that I should be there in time for it.

There was no place for me to sleep, but I spied a big Fiat car which was broken down in a field. I went over, opened the back, and—joy!—it was empty. So I threw my things in—but I didn't see them again for five days afterward—got a cup of coffee and at once went to work.

(*To be continued in next Sunday's* SUN.)